

Protecting friend from foe in West Baghdad

MPs work with Iraqi Police to quell violence, enhance security

By Karl Weisel

104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

A mortar round ended the life of a young Hanau Soldier on duty with the 127th Military Police Company in Baghdad June 18. Spc. Thai Vue, age 22 of Willows, Calif., was killed simply because he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time — pulling maintenance duty on a vehicle at the company's Camp Ferrin-Huggins.

It was the first casualty for the unit, which arrived in Baghdad April 30 to begin a one-year deployment in Iraq. Soldiers paid tribute to their fallen comrade during a memorial service June 23 at the camp which has seen its share of incoming mortar rounds — one landing just outside a barracks the day before at 6 a.m.

While members of the unit which comprises platoons from Hanau, Darmstadt and Baumholder, trained diligently in Germany to look out for terrorist activity such as attacks by rocket propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices, how to deal with the civilian population and other aspects of life in Iraq, knowing how to predict the deadly impact of a mortar has always been near to impossible.

"The mortars vary their times. They'll never fight us toe to toe," said 1st Lt. Erik Archer, 127th MP Co. executive officer. "All they'll do is lob s*** at us and then go and hide."

Despite the grief at the loss of a life, the

MPs remain upbeat about the mission — proud to be playing a role in bringing peace and security to the Iraqi people and convinced that only a small minority are responsible for the ongoing violence.

"I expected a mixed reaction before coming here," said Capt. Kevin Hanrahan, 127th MP Co. commander. "I truly believe most Iraqis want to live in peace and have security. There are just those among them who want to capitalize on instability through terrorism."

"Even in the worst neighborhoods we get smiles and waves," said Archer.

"I think serving here is one of the aspects of my job for my country," said Sgt. Fineson Trueblood, of Darmstadt's 3rd Platoon, as he checked security positions on the roof of the Yarmouk Police Headquarters in West Baghdad. "I know it is dangerous, but at the same time we're helping the Iraqi people out."

"Everyday is an adventure. It's always interesting," said Hanrahan. "We try to remain open-minded, always flexible, try not to get stuck on the small things. We also keep trying to improve the quality of life for our Soldiers."

Those improvements have included everything from completely renovating barracks and community rooms, to installing Internet cafes, fitness rooms and more.

"The Soldiers have done a lot for themselves. Soldier ingenuity — never underestimate it," said Hanrahan. "Every day they put newspapers in our library. We're just trying to create some common spaces for our Soldiers." Other quality-of-life issues have

included sending members of the unit on Rest and Recuperation leave, trips to Qatar and Freedom's Rest, keeping families informed with regular newsletters and home pages, video teleconferences and helping parents get to VTCs in Baghdad to witness their children's graduations from Baumholder, Hanau and Wiesbaden high schools.

"Our Soldiers work an average of 16-hour days," said Hanrahan. "They get a day off every nine days generally, depending on the mission. That's the day they do their laundry, get a haircut and maybe a little sleep."

"We're biased, but I think we have a high level of camaraderie in the unit. ... They're doing a great job," said Hanrahan. "It's all about being professional."

"We've been awfully, awfully busy," he added. "Seems like there are not enough MPs to go around, so the ones who are here are definitely being used."

"It's actually better than I expected," said Spc. Kerina Ward of Hanau's 1st Platoon. "When we got to Kuwait it was crappy — living in tents. Here we have two-person rooms."

"Things are getting better in Baghdad because we're training IPs what we do," said Ward, adding that "being here it makes you appreciate what you do have — the quality of life. Of course my family would rather have me back home — or at least back in Hanau."

Baumholder's Sgt. James Becker echoed Ward's assessment of life in Iraq. "It does make me appreciate Baumholder more to see how the people live here. Please say hello to my wife Shawn and my son Brandon and tell



A 127th MP carries a bag of lollipops to hand out to Iraqi youngsters while patrolling a West Baghdad neighborhood. Photo by Dennis Johnson

"I truly believe most Iraqis want to live in peace and have security. There are just those among them who want to capitalize on instability through terrorism." — Capt. Kevin Hanrahan, 127th Military Police Company commander

them that I love them and miss them."

Patrolling the treacherous West Baghdad neighborhoods, training Iraqi Police and keeping an ever watchful eye out for suspicious objects and individuals are all in a day's (and often a night's) work for the men and women of the 127th MPs. "Our training in Germany helped us to prepare for the real situation in Iraq, but what it really did was place our Soldiers in stressful situations and our leaders to be decisive and use common sense," said Hanrahan. "It's virtually impossible to train for actual IEDs. Practically anything could be an IED. There's so much debris on the streets. We train to know what to do in the event of an IED. Even though I know I'll probably never spot an IED I always keep looking."

"Everywhere you look you see guys with AK-47s," said Hanrahan. "Most of them are part of the security forces. After a while you get a kind of sixth sense and can tell if they're supposed to have them or not."

"I knew what to expect, but there were surprises," said Pfc. John Dimauro, of Baumholder's 4th Platoon. "Our first day here we were hit by an IED. We were out on a convoy to get our Armored Security Vehicles. We were in the back of a five-ton. Some of the windshield hit the driver."

When the blast occurred, Dimauro said he and a buddy were thrown back into the truck. "It was a wake-up call. It made me more alert. Every time I go out on patrol I expect something to happen."

Sgt. Thomas Bowman, on guard at the al-Ashoula Police Station, described the regular shots fired all around the neighborhood surrounding the station. "Seems like we get the most action on Thursdays and Fridays — those are traditional Iraqi wedding days," said the 1st Platoon Soldier from Gelnhausen.

"A different emergency comes up everyday," said Archer, describing the time spent in Iraq as having flown by. "But I'd rather have that than to sit here and think about things."

"One of the primary things we're worried about over the next few weeks (as the expected handover to the Iraqi authority occurred June 28) are enemy forces taking over our police stations," said Archer. "Most of these police stations were ruins when we took over."

Besides beefing up security around the police

stations in West Baghdad, training the Iraqi Police how to conduct day-to-day police business and to defend themselves, the MPs have also been providing food for incarcerated Iraqis.

"When we first took over these police stations we found that many prisoners hadn't been fed for a week," Archer said. "They were relying on their families to bring them food, and some never did. Now we give them MREs (Meals, Ready to Eat) every day."

Archer added that while working with the Iraqi Police and local populace his Soldiers try to avoid talking about political issues. "When we're out interacting with the populace we don't talk politics," he said. When the subject of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison is raised by an IP, Archer said, "I let him know we have Army values and the people responsible for abusing prisoners spit in the face of Army values."

"We're trying to get the IPs out of their vehicles more. There is no 911 — no way to make a police report," said Hanrahan. "The only way an Iraqi can report a crime is to walk to a police station."

"The first six weeks we were here we trained the IPs on joint operations so we feel more secure working with them," said Archer.

"We need the Americans after June 30 to

support us," said Brig. Gen. Sabbah Fahad, chief of the West Baghdad Police.

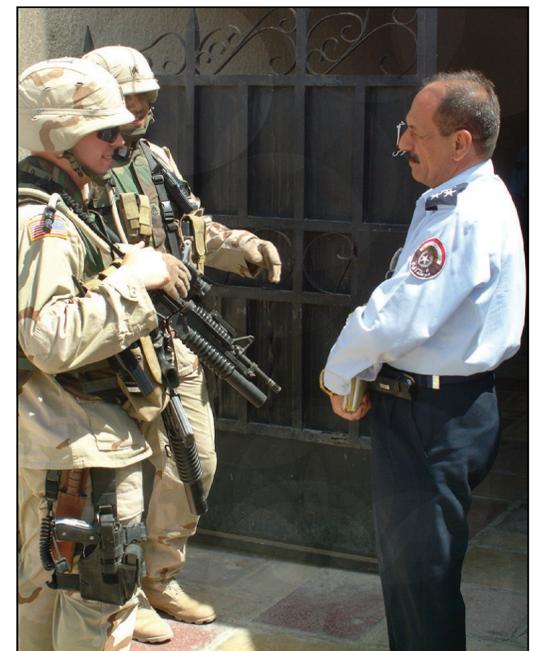
"There is good cooperation between the MPs and the IPs," said 1st Lt. Hameed Mageed, an IP at the al-Ashoula Police Station. "Working with the U.S. Army is beautiful. Things are better now, but we still don't have enough vehicles, weapons and telecommunication equipment. We need more vests for example."

"We've been addressing force protection at all of our police stations," said Hanrahan. "We've got contracts out for at least \$100,000 to improve fighting positions — to assist the Iraqi Police in defending their stations. Our intent is not to lose a station."

In the meantime members of the 127th carry on with the mission, sandbagging their quarters against mortar attacks at Camp Ferrin-Huggins and trying to make Iraq a safer place every day. They are currently attached to the 231st MP Battalion from Alabama, but that could change in the future.

"This is a really good unit. I'm proud to have them," said Lt. Col. Charles H. Gales Jr., 231st MP Bn. commander.

"It doesn't matter to us who we work for, we just want to do our best," said Hanrahan.



1st Lt. Erik Archer and Sgt. Fineson Trueblood, 127th Military Police Company, talk with Brig. Gen. Sabbah Fahad, chief of the West Baghdad Police, during a control check at the Yarmouk Police Headquarters. Photo by Karl Weisel



Pfc. Amber Parks, from 127th MP Co.'s 3rd Platoon, keeps watch for terrorist activity at West Baghdad's Yarmouk Police Station. Photo by Dennis Johnson



A shepherd leads his flock away from a trash pile in the middle of a West Baghdad neighborhood. Vendors selling gasoline, sheep and goats are a common sight along streets in the Iraqi capital. Photo by Karl Weisel



Capt. Kevin Hanrahan, 127th MP Co. commander, checks Soldiers' weapons at a clearing point. Photo left: Pfc. John Dimauro does a little weight training in the new fitness room on Camp Ferrin-Huggins. Photo by Karl Weisel